

# Building a secure future

A REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE'S SAFETY, SECURITY AND PROTECTION



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## About ARACY

ARACY is an independent, not-for-profit, health promotion charity focused on bringing knowledge and people together to enhance the wellbeing including health of Australian children and young people. We link evidence with policymakers and practitioners, focusing on disease prevention through holistic wellbeing including health promotion for the next generation. By bridging academic fields, systems, and jurisdictions, we advocate for evidence-based strategies that guide decisionmakers toward effective outcomes in wellbeing, including health.



## About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF Australia is an Australian charity with a global footprint, helping children and young people everywhere reach their full potential. Here in Australia, we put UNICEF's experience working with children and young people around the world into practice on home soil. We use our voice and work with partners to champion children's rights, ensuring their voices are heard, and that every child is healthy, educated, protected, respected and involved in decisions that impact their lives.

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UNICEF Australia and ARACY acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and communities in which we and our partners work throughout Australia, and recognise their connection to their lands, waters, and communities. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to Elders past and present, and to the children of today who are the Elders of the future.



# Contents

- 4 Introduction
- 6 About the index
- 9 Key findings
- 14 Emerging challenges for children
- 18 Ensuring all children in Australia are safe, loved and protected
- 28 Key areas for action
- 30 References





# Introduction

The Australian Children's Wellbeing Index was developed in 2021 by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and UNICEF Australia. The Index is the first comprehensive tool of its kind in Australia. Aligned with ARACY's The Nest framework, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and UNICEF's global goals, it provides a holistic picture of how children are faring in different aspects of their lives, such as health, education, safety, rights, and participation.

The wellbeing of Australia's children is measured and tracked across the six interconnected domains of The Nest – Australia's Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework. These include being valued, loved and safe; being healthy; learning; having basic material needs met; having a positive sense of identity; and participating in decisions that impact them.

Our publications ultimately aim to set policy priorities and guide action to ensure Australia is an equitable place to grow up and to improve outcomes for all Australian children. We aim to make Australia the best place in the world for every child to grow up.

This is the third in a series of papers that ARACY and UNICEF Australia are developing in partnership to further examine the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index through each of The Nest domains. The papers measure and track what's important for children and young people, incorporating their voices and analysing emerging issues.



This paper explores the Valued, loved and safe domain.

## What do we mean by 'Valued, loved and safe'?

Valued, loved and safe is one of the six domains of child wellbeing that comprise the Nest framework. It reflects some of the fundamental rights that children and young people are entitled to, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

These include:

- The right to development (Article 6) which relates to supporting the holistic development of children, including their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing.
- The right to participation (Article 12) which recognises all children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and have these views taken into account.
- The right to protection (Article 19) which ensures all children are safeguarded from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.



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"Valued, loved and safe is one of the six domains of child wellbeing that comprise the Nest framework. It reflects some of the fundamental rights that children and young people are entitled to, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)."

- The right to special protection and assistance (Article 20) which provides special protection and assistance to children who are temporarily or permanently deprived of their family environment.

Being valued, loved and safe means that children and young people have loving and trusting relationships with family and friends and feel secure about their environment. It's about children and young people feeling valued by their parents, carers, teachers and other adults in their life, and knowing that they are important to others and that others are supportive and caring of them. It's also about children feeling safe at home, in their communities and online, and feeling secure that the environment and climate are being protected for their future. These things lead to positive relationships and connections with others, along with personal and community safety.

Children and young people who are valued, loved and safe are more likely to have a strong sense of self-identity and a positive perception

of themselves. They form secure attachments, have pro-social peer connections, and have positive adult role models or mentors in their lives. Family relationships, where and how a young person lives, their social interactions and whether they are safe from harm are among many factors that can have lifelong effects.

Most Australian children and young people feel safe and valued at home, at school, at work and when they are out socially with family and friends. However, many children and young people do not have this experience. They may grow up in an unsafe environment, be exposed to violence and crime, or face bullying. Families across the country are also impacted by structural or systemic factors like poverty, disadvantage and intergenerational trauma, with flow-on effects for children. These experiences can lead to a range of detrimental health, emotional, social, and behavioural outcomes that can affect a child or young person now and in the future.

**This paper provides a snapshot of the key indicators demonstrating how children and young people in Australia are faring in the valued, loved and safe domain. It gives special consideration to the connection between maltreatment, child protection and youth justice systems, and the compounding challenges children experience when they interact across these systems.**

# About the Index

The Australian Children's Wellbeing Index was developed as a resource to:

- Show what life is like for children and young people aged 0 to 24 in Australia.
- Track progress on children's rights and wellbeing.
- Influence decision-makers to make Australia among the best places to grow up.

The Index is built on UNICEF Australia's five Children's Goals. Based on the UNCRC, the Children's Goals work together to capture everything a child needs to live a good life and thrive. They are:

- ① Every child thrives and survives.
- ② Every child has a fair chance in life.
- ③ Every child is protected from violence and exploitation.
- ④ Every child lives in a clean and safe environment.
- ⑤ Every child learns.

Data is organised using The Nest, Australia's evidence-based framework for child and youth wellbeing. The Nest presents holistic wellbeing as six interdependent domains. A child or young person needs to be doing well in all six domains to thrive. These domains are:



## **Valued, Loved and Safe**

Children have trusting relationships with family and friends.



## **Material Basics**

Children live in suitable housing with appropriate clothing, nutritious food, clean water, and clean air.



## **Healthy**

Children have their physical, mental, and emotional health needs met.



## **Learning**

Children and young people learn through a variety of experiences within the classroom, the home, and the community in which they live.



## **Participating**

Children and young people have a voice, are listened to and have a say in decisions that impact them.



## **Positive Sense of Identity and Culture**

Children feel safe and supported to express their identity and have a sense of belonging.

Together, the Children's Goals and the Nest align as shown below:

### The Nest wellbeing domains

### UNICEF's Children's Goals



#### Valued, Loved and Safe

- Every child thrives and survives
- Every child is protected from violence and exploitation
- Every child lives in a clean and safe environment



#### Material Basics

- Every child thrives and survives
- Every child has a fair chance in life
- Every child lives in a clean and safe environment



#### Healthy

- Every child thrives and survives
- Every child lives in a clean and safe environment



#### Learning

- Every child learns



#### Participating

- Every child has a fair chance in life
- Every child thrives and survives



#### Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

- Every child has a fair chance in life
- Every child thrives and survives
- Every child learns

The Australian Children's Wellbeing Index collates indicators of wellbeing within each domain and uses these to describe the wellbeing of children in Australia now and, where the data is available, over time to track progress and detect important trends.

This paper builds on and complements the data and analysis in the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index with a focus on valued, loved and safe.



# The Wellbeing Wheel

A practical way of conceptualising The Nest





# Snapshot of how children are faring in this domain

## All ages

### Where is Australia doing well?

- The proportion of adolescents aged 15 to 19 years concerned about family conflict has steadily declined over the last decade, having roughly halved between 2007 and 2020 (29.3 per cent to 15.7 per cent) (Tiller, et al., 2020).
- In a consultation with children from families engaged with support services, 92 per cent said they feel safe at home, with 7 per cent feeling a bit safe. 96 per cent said their parents help them feel safe (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022).
- Most children are not regularly excluded from activities with their peers. Just 1 in 7 Year 4 students are deliberately ignored or left out of a group at least every few weeks (Noble, Rehill, Sollis, Harris, & Dakin, 2023). This decreases slightly with age to about 1 in every 8 or 9 students in Years 6 and 8 (Noble, Rehill, Sollis, Harris, & Dakin, 2023).
- The Federal Government has announced a national standard to address bullying in Australian schools including a rapid review into bullying (Minsters' Media Centre, 2025). This is an important step in the right direction to address bullying.



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### Where is Australia lagging?

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented in the out-of-home care and youth justice systems. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are ten times as likely to be placed in out-of-home care and ten times as likely to be placed under youth justice supervision compared with all children of the same age (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024).
- 3 in 5 Australians aged 16 to 24 years have experienced some form of maltreatment and 1 in 4 Australians aged 16 to 24 years has experienced child sexual abuse (Mathews, et al., 2023). Nearly 2 in 5 16 to 24 year olds have been exposed to family and domestic violence (Mathews, et al., 2023).
- There was a 45 per cent increase in reports of online child exploitation between FY 2022-2023 and 2023-2024.
- Australia now spends \$1 billion per year keeping children in custody (Productivity Commission, 2025). This has nearly doubled since 2014-2015. In 2022-2023, 80 per cent of children in detention were unsentenced, and 85 per cent of children in supervised detention returned to sentenced supervision within 12 months (AIHW, 2024).
- Children from the lowest socio-economic areas are 7 times more likely to be under supervision than children from the highest socio-economic areas (AHRC, 2024).
- Children of all ages have shared the importance of the natural environment to their safety and wellbeing (Noble, et al., 2024). Among adolescents, climate has become an increasing national priority, with concern about climate change linked with poorer mental health and a more negative outlook about the future (Gao, et al., 2023).

## Antenatal period and early childhood

(CONCEPTION TO 5 YEARS)

### Where is Australia doing well?

- The rate of substantiated child protection notifications – where an investigation has found a child has been or is being harmed – has decreased steadily among young children since 2021 (AIHW, 2024). The rate of substantiations among infants (under 1 year old) decreased from 16.7 to 13.8 per 1,000 between 2021 and 2023 (AIHW, 2024). Similarly, the rate decreased from 9.3 to 8.2 per 1,000 for children aged 1 to 4 years (AIHW, 2024).
- Rates of young children (0-4 years) dying due to injury have decreased steadily between 2000 and 2015 (AIHW, 2019). Over the period, death due to injury decreased from 15.5 to 5.7 per 100,000 children of the same age (AIHW, 2019).
- The Early Years Strategy (2024) puts forward a 10-year roadmap designed to give children in Australia the best start in life (Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services), 2024). It recognises the need for children to be “nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities.”
- Paid parental leave (PPL) provides a critical opportunity for families to connect with and bond with their newborns, and to provide nurturing care to their children. In 2023 the government extended PPL from 18 weeks to 20 weeks, adding an additional 2 weeks from July 2024, with a plan to increase to the full 26 weeks by 2026.



### Where is Australia lagging?

- While rates of substantiated child protection notifications have decreased, children under 1 year of age have the highest rates of child protection substantiations compared with other age groups. Children under 1 year of age have a substantiation rate of 13.8 per 1,000 children compared with an average of 7.9 per 1,000 children across all age groups (AIHW, 2022).
- Children aged under 1 year have the highest rates of entry into out-of-home care, with a rate of 6.3 per 1,000 children of the same age group. This is more than three times higher than any other age group (AIHW, 2024).
- While Australia has made much progress in paid parental leave, we have some way to go to catch up to other comparable countries. The average duration of paid parental leave for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries is 39 weeks, with Australia aiming to reach 26 weeks by 2026 (Ewe, 2024).

## Middle years

(5–15 YEARS)

### Where is Australia doing well?

- The rate of children aged 10 to 14 years under youth justice supervision has steadily decreased over the last 10 years (AIHW, 2022), with reduced rates of both community supervision and detention. The rate of children aged 10 to 14 years under youth justice supervision has decreased from 71.9 to 44.2 per 100,000 children between 2011 and 2020 (AIHW, 2022).
- Detention of children aged 10 to 14 years has also steadily decreased. The rate of detention of children has decreased from 10.3 to 7.5 per 100,000 children between 2016 and 2020 (AIHW, 2022).
- Among children aged 8 and over in the out of home care system, most (92 per cent) feel safe and settled in their current placement, and almost all (97 per cent) reported there was a significant adult in their lives who cares about what happens to them (AIHW, 2019).

### Where is Australia lagging?

- The minimum age of criminal responsibility is 10 in all states and territories, except the ACT where it is 14 years. This is below international standards and is inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The younger a child is when under justice supervision, the more likely they are to return to supervision within 12 months (AIHW, 2024).
- Among Australian children aged 10 years at their first youth justice supervision, 94 per cent had experienced an interaction with the child protection system (AIHW, 2024).
- The rate of sexual assault of children aged 0 to 14 years has steadily increased (AIHW, 2022). Girls aged 10 to 14 experience more than five times the rate of family and domestic related sexual assault compared with boys (AIHW, 2022).
- The rate of bullying in Australia is among the highest in the world when compared with other OECD countries. One in 3 students aged 15 years report being bullied at least a few times per month. This places Australia 35th out of 43 comparable countries (OECD, 2022).





## Young people

(12–25 YEARS)



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### Where is Australia doing well?

- While rates of bullying in children aged 15 are higher than most comparable countries, the rate of young people with high levels of concern about bullying has almost halved since 2007, from 21.3 per cent to 12.4 per cent (Tiller, et al., 2020).
- Social connections are important for this age group. Young people turn to friends (64 per cent) or parents and guardians (59 per cent) when they need help (McHale, et al., 2024).
- Fifty-three per cent of students aged 15 years report that their parents encourage them to be confident. Australia is one of the top performing countries globally, ranked 10th out of 42 countries (OECD, 2022).
- The rate of children with substantiated child protection concerns has steadily decreased since 2021 for young people aged 15 to 17 years. The rate of substantiations decreased from 5.3 to 4.5 per 1,000 children aged 15 to 17 between 2021 and 2023 (AIHW, 2024).

### Where is Australia lagging?

- On an average day in 2022-2023, 4,542 young people aged 10 and over were under youth justice supervision in Australia, with 57 per cent being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (AIHW, 2024).
- 71 per cent of teenagers aged 15-17 have seen hate speech online (with 62 per cent of them taking action against it) and 39 per cent have seen self-harm content online (with 61 per cent of them taking action against it) (UNICEF Australia, 2024).
- 51 per cent of young people aged 15-19 feel proud to be a part of their community, however just 36 per cent feel that young people in their community have a say on issues that matter to them (McHale, et al., 2024).

## Where is Australia Doing Well?



### Concerns about family conflict halved

The proportion of children concerned about family conflict halved between 2007 and 2020.



### The Early Years Strategy (2024)

recognises the need for children to be nurtured and supported by families and communities, helping to give them the best start in life.



### Child protection notifications decreased

Rates of substantiated child protection notifications have decreased steadily since 2021.



### Bullying concerns almost halved

The rate of young people with high levels of concern about bullying has almost halved since 2007 and most young people feel they can turn to friends for support (64%).



### Youth justice and supervision

Rates of children aged 10-14 under youth justice supervision or detention decreased in the years leading up to 2020.

## Where is Australia Lagging?



### 3 in 5 Australians

aged 16 to 24 years have experienced some form of maltreatment.



### 1 in 4 Australians

aged 16 to 24 years have experienced child sexual abuse.



### Bullying rates

Australia has one of the highest rates of bullying compared with other OECD countries.



### 10 years old

The minimum age of criminal responsibility is 10 in all states and territories except the ACT. This is inconsistent with the UNCRC.

# 10x

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are ten times as likely to be placed in out-of-home care and ten times as likely to be placed under youth justice supervision compared with all children of the same age.



# Emerging Challenges for Children

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## 1

## Safer spaces online

Recent media coverage of the Government's proposed 'social media ban' has brought national attention to the potential harms that technology represents to children and young people, and ignited a debate on where the responsibility lies for keeping children and young people safe online. More than 6 in 10 (63 per cent) of young Australians are at least somewhat concerned about social media use, with more than 1 in 6 extremely or very concerned about it (McHale, et al., 2024). Almost half (45.6 per cent) of young Australians are also concerned about artificial intelligence (McHale, et al., 2024).

Yet research on the effects of social media on Australian children is scant, and international evidence is mixed. Positive effects linked to social media use include social connectedness and creative outlets, while negative effects included mental health issues and propagation of misinformation (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Geirdal, et al., 2021; Smith, Leonis, & Anandavalli, 2021; Orygen, 2024). The eSafety Commission has nominated a variety of specific harms related to recommender systems, which use an algorithm to curate content specifically tailored to the user (eSafety Commissioner, 2022). Recommender systems, such as TikTok, can be harmful to children and young people, as well as society more broadly through:

- Exposure to harmful or developmentally inappropriate material.
- Friend or follower suggestions leading to interactions with dangerous adults.
- Amplifying misinformation, extreme views and normalising prejudice and hate.
- Promotion of unrealistic body ideals and beauty stereotypes.
- Normalisation of the sexualisation of young people.
- Encouragement of binge consumption without breaks.
- Encouraging dangerous behaviour and inciting online and physical violence.

While there has been acknowledgment across the child wellbeing sector of both the potential harms and benefits of social media, a 'blanket ban' has been largely condemned due to the lack of emphasis on empowering children and young people to navigate the internet safely and the lack of responsibility placed on social media providers to mitigate potential harms. Analogies have been drawn with water safety, where a ban is akin to banning pools rather than teaching kids to swim (Grant, 2024).

There is an urgent need to better understand the impacts of social media use for children and young people and to codesign mechanisms that enhance the benefits and mitigate the potential harms of social media use.



2

## The cost-of-living crisis and its growing impacts on children and young people's safety

The cost-of-living crisis is impacting the safety of children and families. The safety of women and children needs to be front of mind when examining the consequences of the cost-of-living crisis and any solutions (Domestic Violence NSW, 2023). There are significant concerns around the inability for women experiencing violent relationships to support themselves and their children in the current cost-of-living crisis, often having to choose between staying in these relationships and homelessness.

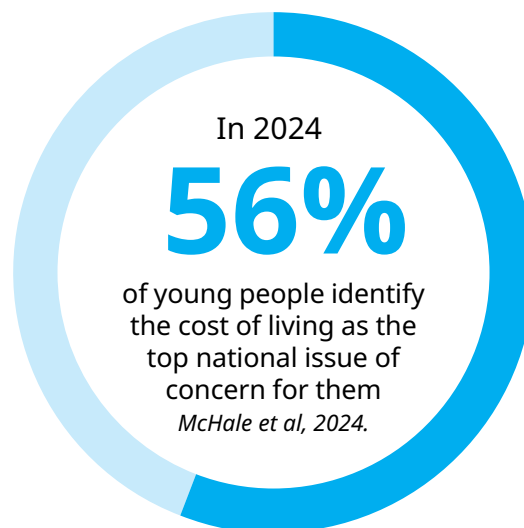
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**"[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the past year was] watching my parents struggle to pay the bills in the growing economy."**

FEMALE, 15, NEW SOUTH WALES, MISSION AUSTRALIA YOUTH SURVEY 2024

Financial reasons have also been reported by single mothers as a reason for returning to a previous violent partner following a temporary separation. The Summers (2022) analysis of the 2016 Personal Safety Survey showed that of the single mothers who had experienced previous partner violence, more than half (55 per cent, or an estimated 92,600) had ever temporarily separated from the violent partner. Almost one quarter (24 per cent) of these women said they had returned to the violent partner because they had no money or financial support and 14 per cent said they had nowhere else to go (Summers 2022).

In 2024, more than half (56 per cent) of young people identify the cost of living as the top national issue of concern for them (McHale, et al., 2024). In addition, over the past year, 11 per



cent of young people reported worrying about having a safe place to stay and 7.4 per cent spent time away from home because they felt they could not go back.

While the cost-of-living crisis has gained national media attention, there is a critical need for governments to enhance social protection measures for low-income families and children – especially those impacted by domestic and family violence. This includes increased family tax benefits, subsidies for essential services, provision of financial relief to low-income families as well as safe and affordable housing for women and children at risk or suffering from domestic violence.

“

**[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the past year was] fear of being kicked out of [the] house due to rent not being able to be paid and not having enough money to last the week for food.**

17-YEAR-OLD QLD, MISSION AUSTRALIA YOUTH SURVEY 2024



3

## Climate related disasters and an increase in violence in families.

Natural hazards and climate-induced disasters can lead to children being separated from their families, schools, homes and communities. They can cause families stress, financial pressures, disrupted social connections and exacerbate inequalities, which can lead to negative coping mechanisms and an increase in violence against women and children (Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services), 2022).

Despite these connections being broadly understood, there has been limited research into the impacts of disasters on children's safety here in Australia. The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children notes this as an area for further research, and The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children calls for emergency response strategies to include measures that address the risk of violence against women and children. This includes equipping first responders to recognise signs of violence and refer victims to support services.





# Ensuring all children in Australia are safe, loved and protected

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## Deep Dive: Intersections between childhood experiences of maltreatment, family violence and child protection with Australia's youth justice systems

Evidence suggests that there is a strong connection between complex challenges and barriers faced in childhood and involvement with the youth justice system. These include children's experiences with housing and homelessness, access to quality education, drug and alcohol use, health and mental health, as well as a child's experience of safety and security at home and in the community. Children and young people who have contact with the youth justice system – and the adult justice system later in life – often have lived experience of maltreatment, domestic and family violence, and contact with child protection systems including out of home care.

While not all children who experience adverse conditions and maltreatment will have contact with the justice system – the data tells an alarming story around the high rates of interconnectivity.

UNICEF Australia and ARACY believe in well-resourced, child friendly and evidence-based systems and services that work in children's best interests and promote their rights. Investment in equitable quality services that are preventative, diversionary and restorative will lead to better, fairer and more beneficial outcomes for children and wider society.

**This spotlight topic will explore connections between adverse experiences in childhood, child protection services and juvenile justice.**

“

"(The) Youth Justice system is messed up. It's not helping us to make us do what we don't want to do, which is get in trouble."

(CHILD AND YOUTH QUOTES FROM HELP WAY SOONER REPORT)



### 3 in 4 people

who have been arrested have experienced child maltreatment (*Mathews, et al., 2023*)



Around

### 40% of children

and young people under youth justice supervision have been involved with the child protection system



### 94%

of Australian 10-year-olds at their first youth justice supervision have had an interaction with the child protection system (*AIHW, 2024*)





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“

"I know for me and everyone I knew going into youth justice, we all had issues with our family... might have been in case, or they used drugs or were in and out of justice themselves."

(CHILD AND YOUTH QUOTES FROM HELPWAY SOONER REPORT)

## Maltreatment

Experience of child maltreatment is extraordinarily common. In 2023, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) research team published the first nationally representative data on the prevalence of each of the five types of child maltreatment in Australia, and their associated health impacts through life. The five types of maltreatment are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic violence.

This study, which gathered self-reported experience of child maltreatment from 8,503 representative Australians aged 16 and over, **found that more than 6 in 10 (62.2 per cent) of Australians have ever experienced some form of child maltreatment.** This was similar to younger Australians, with 61.2 per cent of those aged 16 to 24 years having ever experienced maltreatment.

**Each of the five maltreatment types were extraordinarily common.** Across the Australian population aged 16 to 24 years old, it was found that:

- 43.8 per cent experienced exposure to domestic violence
- 34.6 per cent experienced emotional abuse
- 28.2 per cent experienced physical abuse
- 25.7 per cent experienced sexual abuse
- 10.3 per cent experienced neglect



Multi-type maltreatment is when a child experiences two or more types of maltreatment. Sadly, the ACMS found that **multi-maltreatment is the most common experience**, above single type maltreatment and above no maltreatment. Among people aged 16 to 24 years, 4 in 10 (38.8%) had never experienced maltreatment, 1 in 5 experienced single type maltreatment (21.0%), and 4 in 10 (40.2%) had experienced two or more types of maltreatment. The study also found that **parental separation roughly doubled the risk of multi-type maltreatment**. Living with someone who was mentally ill, severely depressed, or suicidal increased the risk of multi-type maltreatment by about two and a half times, as did living with someone with a problem with alcohol or drugs.

Experience of domestic violence, emotional abuse, and neglect are slightly more common among young Australians aged 16 to 24 years compared with all ages. Conversely, physical and sexual abuse are less common among younger Australians compared with all ages. However, it is difficult to appreciate any trends over time. Looking across generations, the older age group of 45+ years were the least likely to experience any maltreatment, as well as the least likely to experience multi-maltreatment. The middle age group of 25 to 44 years were the most likely to experience any maltreatment and multi-type maltreatment. Interestingly, young males aged 16 to 24 years had the lowest rates of any maltreatment (55.5 per cent), while women aged 25 to 44 years had the highest (70.4 per cent).

An important finding from ACMS is that **experience of maltreatment varies by gender**. Experience of **sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect are much more common among females** compared with males, with sexual abuse having the most pronounced difference. **Sexual abuse is 2.4 times as common among females** aged 16 to 24 years compared with males (35.2 per cent versus 14.5 per cent). Similarly, neglect is 1.7 times as common (12.5 per cent versus 7.2 per cent) and emotional abuse is 1.5 times as common (40.5 per cent versus 26.9 per cent). **Even higher rates of maltreatment are seen among gender diverse Australians**. Among gender diverse participants of all ages:

- 58 per cent have ever experienced emotional abuse (40.5 per cent of females, 26.9 per cent of males)
- 52 per cent have ever experienced sexual abuse (35.2 per cent of females, 14.5 per cent of males)
- 50 per cent have ever experienced physical abuse (31.5 per cent of females, 32.1 per cent of males)
- 26 per cent have ever experience neglect (10.8 per cent of females, 6.7 percent of males)

Although disaggregated data wasn't available for gender diverse Australians in specific age groups, this is consistent with other sources, such as the Mission Australia Youth Survey 2024, where domestic violence was an issue of concern among 57.8 per cent of gender diverse youth compared with 37.2 per cent of young females and 27.6 per cent of young males. Gender diverse people were not only more often abused but had greater severity of their abuse. Gender diverse participants were six times more likely to have experienced all five types of maltreatment compared with males (Gender diverse 12.4 per cent, males 2.0 percent, females 4.7 per cent).





"Almost all of the underlying causes of negative behaviour displayed by children lie beyond the reach of the youth justice system."

STANDING COUNCIL OF ATTORNEYS-GENERAL (SCAG) WORKING GROUP REPORT ON THE AGE OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY (THE SCAG MACR WORKING GROUP REPORT)



© UNICEF Australia/Supplied

Child maltreatment can have devastating and enduring effects on health and social outcomes. For example, maltreated children are more likely to have mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and self-harm. The ACMS found that a history of maltreatment was linked to four times greater odds of a recent suicide attempt in adulthood. Maltreated children are more likely to have poorer social outcomes, such as becoming engaged with the justice system, and have problems with alcohol and other drugs such as cigarette smoking and cannabis. The ACMS found that any form of maltreatment is associated with six times greater odds of cannabis dependence. They also have greater risk of physical health problems such as heart disease, lung disease, and cancer. Factors such as severity and type of maltreatment can influence these outcomes.

Importantly, data on prevalence of child maltreatment is almost entirely retrospective, meaning that the maltreatment has already occurred usually many years earlier. There is very limited availability of data capturing younger children's experiences and the maltreatment that is currently occurring. The child protection system is one of the few sources of information on current maltreatment. However, children involved in the child protection system represent a very small proportion of those experiencing maltreatment. To illustrate, in 2022-2023, eight children per 1000 were the subject of substantiated maltreatment. Yet the ACMS indicates that more than 600 per 1000 have likely experienced at least one form of maltreatment. While these statistics are not directly comparable, they provide an indication of the degree of maltreatment presently occurring that goes undetected.

The degree of undetected maltreatment and seriousness of long-term effects on children points to an urgent need for prioritisation of evidence-based, universal prevention strategies that target whole populations, coupled with robust monitoring of child protection outcomes to ensure population wide effectiveness.



## Child protection

Of the many children who are maltreated, relatively few engage with the child protection system, and fewer still proceed to alternative care arrangements. In 2022–23, 293,000 children were subjects of notifications (51 per 1000). The most common sources of notifications were school personnel (28 per cent), police (22 per cent) and medical or health personnel (10 per cent) (AIHW, 2024). In the same year, about 45,500 children were the subject of a substantiation (8 in 1000) (AIHW, 2024). Emotional abuse and neglect were the most common forms of maltreatment among children with a substantiation, which differs from domestic violence as the most common form of maltreatment generally (AIHW, 2024; Mathews, et al., 2023). Out-of-home care admission occurred for 10,900 children (2 in 1000) (AIHW, 2024). Children placed in out-of-home care are 16 times more likely than children in the general population to be under youth justice supervision in the same year. This risk increases when the child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Living in very remote parts of Australia, coming from one of the lowest socio-economic areas, and being aged less than one year were all associated with increased risk of having a substantiation (AIHW, 2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children also continue to be significantly overrepresented in Australia's child protection system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait

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**"I grew up with a lot of alcohol and family violence... I was running from home, smoking weed at a young age. Up to no good basically. Just trying to get away from the life I was living. I wanted to feel wanted and accepted and fit in with people."**

ABORIGINAL CHILD DETAINED IN BANKSIA HILL DETENTION CENTRE, WA (AUSTRALIAN CHILD RIGHTS TASKFORCE, 2018).

On average



**1 child**

has a family-violence related hospital stay every day



**over 1 in 3**

young people had their first family violence-related hospital stay before the age of five years

Islander children have more than 10 times the rate of admission to out-of-home care than non-indigenous children (AIHW, 2024).

Concerningly, evidence around whether placement in out-of-home care is beneficial to child outcomes is inconclusive. A recent review found that “out-of-home care might have a protective effect for children in the physical health, language, cognitive and education domains, but not in the emotional or social domains or in relation to police contacts” (Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research (FACSIAR), 2022). Related to this is the noteworthy point that common indicators used to examine trends in the child protection system are not child-centred. The indicators used, such as notifications, substantiations, and placement in alternative care arrangements, are systems indicators which do not capture children's experiences and wellbeing. Children's voices, such as whether they feel safer, have more trusting relationships, whether their material needs are being better met etc. must be routinely embedded alongside systems indicators to monitor and track children's safety and the effectiveness of our child protection systems.

## Family and domestic violence

Family and domestic violence is one of the five identified types of child maltreatment. It is the most common form of child maltreatment, affecting more than 4 in 10 young Australians aged 16 to 24 years (Mathews, et al., 2023). On average, one child has a family-violence related hospital stay every day, and over one in three young people have their first family violence-related hospital stay before the age of five years (AIHW, 2024).

According to the Australia's Family Law Act, family violence is described as "violent, threatening, or other behaviours that coerces or controls a member of the person's family or causes them

to be fearful" (AustLII, 1975). Family and domestic violence can occur among family members and is common in intimate partner relationships. It's important to note that not all family violence involves physical violence. It can take many

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"[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the past year was] family conflict, which brings challenges to my mental [and] well-being, and reduces my support system at home. Having to move house to separate from conflict also impacted my studies."

FEMALE, 18, QUEENSLAND, YOUTH SURVEY REPORT 2024, MISSION AUSTRALIA.



forms such as sexual violence and coercion, emotional abuse (including denigration), financial abuse, and spiritual or cultural abuse. Family violence can also occur in the context of coercive control, where a person uses patterns of abusive behaviour over time to exert power and dominance in everyday life, to create fear, control or manipulate others, and deny liberty and autonomy.

Importantly, children do not have to be the direct victims of violence for it to be harmful; witnessing violence is considered a form of child maltreatment which comes with significant risks of harm (Richerds, 2011). Any intimate partner violence needs to be seen as a risk to children's safety. Of the 138 children killed by filicide between 2010 and 2018, nine in 10 of them were preceded by intimate partner violence (ANROWS, 2024).

Domestic and family violence is also a common trigger for engagement with the child protection system. Of all child protection notifications made to the notification Helpline in NSW, 33% related to domestic and family violence either on its own or in combination with other concerns (Luu, et al., 2024). When domestic and family violence is coupled with substance use and parental mental health problems, the risk of children being placed in out of home care is drastically increases. Children with all three risk factors have 22 times greater odds of out-of-home care placement compared with domestic and family violence alone (Luu, et al., 2024). Of children with all three risk factors, 16% proceeded to out of home care placement (compared with 7% for those with two risk factors, 1% with domestic and family violence only, and 2% of those with notifications unrelated to domestic and family violence) (Luu, et al., 2024). Notably, experience of child maltreatment drastically increases the odds of mental health conditions and problems with drugs and/or alcohol in adulthood (Lawrence, et al., 2023), which creates condition conducive to intergenerational effects of maltreatment.



## Youth justice

On an average day in 2022-2023, 4542 young people aged 10 and over were under youth justice supervision in Australia (AIHW, 2024). Although relatively few young people were in detention on an average day, about half (50% or 4605) of all young people who were supervised during 2022-2023 had been in detention at some time during the year. The majority of young people under supervision on an average day were male (81 per cent), and 57 per cent of young people under supervision were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Any experience of child maltreatment increases the odds of engagement with the justice system through either arrest, conviction, or incarceration (Mathews, et al., 2023). This effect is seen both within the youth and adult justice systems (Mathews, et al., 2023; AIHW, 2024). More severe maltreatment is associated with larger effects; for example, men with any experience of child maltreatment have more than twice the lifetime odds of imprisonment, and those with chronic, multi-type maltreatment have more than three times the odds (Mathews, et al., 2023). Maltreatment is especially associated with early interaction with the justice system. **Among Australian children aged 10 years at their first youth justice supervision, 94% had an interaction with the child protection system** (AIHW, 2024).

While the vast majority of incarcerated people have experienced child maltreatment, most people who have experienced child maltreatment will not go on to justice system

involvement (Mathews, et al., 2023). Of people with any experience of maltreatment, 85 per cent will never be arrested. Conversely, of those people who have ever been arrested, 3 in 4 have experienced child maltreatment (Mathews, et al., 2023). Therefore, child maltreatment increases the odds of justice system involvement, but not in a deterministic way. This suggests that while child maltreatment is a powerful factor in predicting justice system involvement, there are other factors that can be leveraged to protect children from proceeding down this path. Reducing the incidence of child maltreatment, as well as understanding the risk and protective factors that influence progression from child maltreatment to justice system involvement are critical in improving children's lifetime trajectories.

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"The younger children exposed to detention become the next generation of repeat offenders. This is what happened to me, and I have seen it happen to other children in detention."

YOUNG PERSON – 'HELP WAY EARLIER':  
HOW AUSTRALIA CAN TRANSFORM  
CHILD JUSTICE TO IMPROVE SAFETY AND  
WELLBEING REPORT.



## Summary

There are a multitude of common themes occurring across child maltreatment, domestic and family violence, and engagement with the youth justice and child protection systems. Experiencing child maltreatment including domestic violence and being engaged with the child protection and/or youth justice systems appear to be self-perpetuating, where the experience of one increases the risk of experience of another.

Yet the glaring reality is indeed the resilience of children despite experiencing adversity. What we understand from the ACMS is that most children experience some form of maltreatment, and that multiple forms of treatment is more common than one or none. And yet the vast majority of children do not go on to have severe mental health conditions, drug and alcohol problems, or engage in the youth justice system. It is indeed

not a pipeline from child maltreatment to poorer social and health outcomes – rather, the absence of maltreatment gives children the best chance to thrive throughout their lives.

There are several next steps set out in the Key Areas for Action section that include:

- Increase the prioritisation of children
- Keep children safe from the start
- A voice for children.

We must explore what prevents so many children from adverse long-term outcomes despite their experience of maltreatment. What is the difference between those who end up in contact with the youth justice system and those who don't? We need to develop a better understanding of the protective factors that can be amplified. Listening to children's voices is critical in gaining this understanding.



# Key Areas for Action



## Increase the prioritisation of children

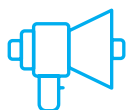
- ① Legislated commitments which incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Australian law.
- ② A dedicated Cabinet Minister for Children who is responsible for the wellbeing and rights of children, and can facilitate co-ordination across all Commonwealth government portfolios with responsibilities for children.
- ③ National Cabinet to make children a national priority supported by a Ministerial Council for Child Wellbeing with multidisciplinary experts.
- ④ A central agency for children in the Prime Minister's Office.
- ⑤ A National Plan that sets an aspirational agenda for all Australian children whilst also looking to futureproof the services and systems that children rely upon.



## Keep children safe from the start

- ① Prioritise and invest in supports and services that families and children need to thrive and that keep children safe from harm, including parenting support – particularly in the first 2,000 days.  
  
Workforce and system capacity in child focussed sectors should also be improved and adequately resourced, including upskilling workforces on trauma informed and culturally sensitive care.
- ② Support and adequately resource Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to lead and deliver services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- ③ Increase funding and support for evidence-based preventative and diversionary programs to reduce the harm to children in the criminal justice system.





## A voice for children

- ① Opportunities should be created for children to express their views within services and systems meant to protect them. A cultural shift is needed to elevate children's voices to the same level of importance as system indicators in evaluating policy and system effectiveness.





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